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ABSTRACT

The transition process from high school to college is considered from the perspective of a high school practitioner. Educational, social/personal, and financial factors that influence student planning are discussed. It is suggested that the secondary school must begin as early as the freshman year to help plan the curriculum the student will pursue. By the sophomore year, the student should be aware of various careers, and formal guidance should begin in the junior year. Juniors need to think about career possibilities and to assess their strengths and weaknesses (i.e., courses, test scores, and class rank). The adviser helps the students determine priorities that will meet the students' needs (e.g., what schools will accept them). During the senior year, the pressures build to choose the right college, to select a major, and to meet admissions criteria for specific fields. The students also may have fears of being away from family and friends and doubts about whether they are making the right decisions and whether they will be accepted socially at college. Although education and personal elements were once the main considerations, the transition process is now being determined by financial considerations. (SW)

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TESTIMONY BY

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

ADMISSION STANDARDS
THE TRANSITION PROCESS

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JUNE 23, 1982
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

I have been asked to address the transition process as it fits into the overall question of admission standards.

The opportunity to come before this commission is indeed a privilege. My comments are from my personal experiences as a secondary school practitioner and as the representative of the National Association of College Admissions Counselors.

The transitional process is not easy for the student because very often "independence" and "adult" status are frightening as well as desired. In New South Wales it is done by knocking out a tooth, in northern New Guinea by dousing with cold water, and in the Fiji Islands by painting with yellow dye and liberally applying a tatoo needle. Through these "rites of passage" young people move directly from childhood into adulthood.

More sophisticated though the American society may be, it has nothing comparable to these evidently primitive ceremonies. Our "domesticated rite of passage" begins when a young person starts casting for a way to begin what must seem like an impossible journey. Even more unnerving than the journey itself is the bewildering business of trying to chart a sensible course. Thus, young people nearing the time of career choice or graduation thrash about with questions they are no more prepared to answer than they are ready to pilot an airplane or practice law. When students come into our offices, they do not know what they do not know--they are asked to declare a major for a field they know nothing about, choose a school from pictures in brochures, sort through an alphabet maze of acronyms and fill out form after form for a career they probably will not enter five years down the line.

In addition, they are being asked to make these decisions in a climate of economic uncertainty, in an environment of an ever more changing employment market. Many of these students will have three to five different careers in a life time, and many jobs of the 20 year future do not even exist today. In this sense the reflective and critical skills and flexibility of a good liberal education may be the most realistic kind of training that we can offer and that employees can seek. The most important task before education lies not in entrance to a particular market place at a particular point in time, rather our most important mission is to produce a product that can read, write and deal with issues such as product integrity, business ethics and value judgments. We hear very little about the relation of education to national goals. Yet in a basic sense, the crisis in education cannot be divorced from the larger national crises over the skewed nature of public and private investments.

The decision making process is a personal one, and the influences brought to bear on the student are complex and confusing. Society, prompted by industry, has created some of these demands. Some of the confusion lies in an ignorance of facts, some an emotional attitude toward education, some an emotional attitude toward adulthood, some misinformation, but in the end, the individual's decision is not often based on his motivation and his concept of personal success.

I am going to attempt to divide those factors that influence student planning into three categories: 1) educational, 2) social and personal, and 3) financial. At another point in time I would have stated that most decisions were made because of factors 1 and 2 and that financial consideration was apart -- however, financial considerations are now I believe, of equal importance.

The secondary school plays a key role in all aspects of the transition process. This process must begin early. It must begin as early as the freshmen year with basic overall planning as to curriculum that the student will pursue. It then continues into the sophomore year with an awareness level raised of 'various careers". The junior year is really a benchmark year. While it is recognized that students are not ready even in the junior year, the formalized guidance process must begin. For what occurs in our system is that one day a student is a junior in high school and ten weeks later he is a senior in high school -- fully expected by family and peers to know what he wants to major in and what school he will attend. In reality students probably begin to get ready sometime in late summer when they pick up their school schedules. Unfortunately counselors are generally not available during this time. Hopefully the toe-hold that was established during the junior year will begin to take hold. What does that toe-hold take into account -- the key questions of access and choice. How to proceed to the questions of access and choice is a slow process that must begin by raising the following questions: 1) what do I think I want to do, 2) what am I capable of doing, and 3) what is available out there in the job market? In addressing these questions we are asking juniors to take a look-see at the existing possibilities for a career; we are asking them to assess their individual strengths and weaknesses, i.e., courses, test scores, and rank in class. As we move through this process, we begin to determine priorities that will meet the student's needs -- what schools will accept them, distance from home, size of the institution, private or state supported, major fields of study, type of student body and finally, cost. As we are working through this phase, we must keep in mind that we are dealing with an age group that has very high hopes, but the reality of the process has not begun to set in -- they are not ready enough to be scared.

The readiness level begins in the transformation I touched upon that occurs during that time span from the end of junior year to the start of senior year. As senior year unfolds, the pressures build, pressures of choosing the right college, selecting a major, and meeting ever increasing admissions criteria for specific fields such as engineering, business, computer science, and allied health, meeting expectation levels -- the light dawns, and panic hits.

Seniors by this point have already attended college nights or college fair programs, talked with numerous college representatives and been swamped with mail. It is not until they visit their first college that those guidance sessions begin to pay off. They begin to remember the handouts, the discussions, the check list, and that "dream school" begins to evolve. That dream school is the campus where they feel the most comfortable.

It is at this point that we enter phase two of the process. Students are no different from the rest of society in that they create their own perceptions and their own mind set. Will they fit in on a particular campus; will they be accepted? They have created a fantasy of what room in a dorm they will occupy. They have placed themselves in this fantasy state as they await the verdict of acceptance or rejection. The dream school concept begins to wither away with reality as they await these acceptances. Fears of being away from family and friends begin to crop up. Are they really going to like what they are choosing -- both the college and the possible career? Are they going to be accepted socially at college? Will they be able to withstand peer pressures without the family support system? "What if I am not accepted at the school of my choice? What will my family, my friends think of me?" The unknown complicates this whole process. So senior year becomes a year of roller-coaster twists and turns.

Just as a student is going through his up and downs, so are mom and dad. Mom and dad are proud to have a youngster on the verge of college -- the notion of my son -- the doctor, my daughter -- the lawyer, enter into conversations. Yet with this sense of pride a sense of loss looms -- "They don't need me anymore," a sense of, "My life didn't turn out, but my child's will, and they will do this," or the most difficult, "My child is leaving the nest." Mom and dad are looking to the "right" school that will be good for their son or daughter, the school that is acceptable at the office or in the neighborhood, and then the doubt of affordability comes to play. The myth and reality of financial aid comes about; will they be eligible for financial assistance, if so, how much, and when will they know? As the parents are on a downward ride on their roller coaster, the student might be on an upward course on theirs. The difficulties of parental expectations and child's reconciliation come into focus.

This is where the professional counselor comes to the forefront. That individual has the professional expertise to bring expectation to reconciliation -- while meeting the needs of both student and parent and always taking into account the numerous factors that play a part in the process.

In reality what is occurring across the land, what with declining enrollments and budget cutbacks, is that those professional counselors on both the secondary and college level are being phased out of jobs. We are dealing with a shaky economy, escalating college costs, a possible cutback and a definite slow down of the financial aid process. Where once the factors of education, social and personal elements were driving the wheel -- the transition process is being driven by financial consideration.

What I have addressed is that process in those secondary schools that have a strong commitment to student services -- what occurs at the vast majority of secondary schools is another consideration.

The transition process is really one of making that step into another phase of life -- never an easy process. There are so many factors that unless schools' prioritize this aspect of the educational process, the American "rite of passage" process will truly be an impossible journey. The 1980's and 1990's come on either as decades of constriction or as an era of growth and change for education. To achieve a level of dynamic redevelopment, education and government will have to reawaken public faith in what education and society can achieve. That formidable educational challenge is our measure, and it is, I believe, not too late to begin. We can burst forth by facing up to those questions that relate not only to the aims and functioning of higher education but to what is at stake in the future of the Republic -- We are not faceless people; we have the power to shape future thinking by dealing with those students who will most impact the future.